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ABSTRACT

Reasons for establishing an extensive reading approach to teaching reading in English as a Second Language at a Japanese high school are enumerated, and some recommendations for implementing such a program are offered. Research on comprehensible input in language learning, particularly input from reading as an effective and efficient source, is reviewed. A distinction is made between extensive reading and intensive reading, and the advantages of the former in providing practice in decoding skills, reading success, and comprehensible input are noted. The discussion then turns to selection of appropriate reading materials, including graded readers, authentic texts, and children's literature. It is concluded that for a high school program, short novels, biographies, and story collections are practical and appealing to students, and graded readers accompanied by audiotapes are also useful. Three basic formats for extensive reading programs are described: students' simultaneous reading of class readers; use of class libraries; and use of reading materials from the school library. Quantity of reading to be assigned at different ability levels, and the means used to measure the reading actually accomplished, are also considered. Sample book report forms are provided. Contains 19 references. (MSE)

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Extensive Reading in English: Rationale and Possibilities for a Program at Shirayuri Gakuen

Ken Schmidt

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Extensive Reading in English:
Rationale and Possibilities for a Program at Shirayuri Gakuen

Ken Schmidt

Introduction

Although the importance of comprehensible input in second language acquisition is not a new idea, I have only recently begun to appreciate the *extent* of this need and the implications this has for language learning and teaching in my present context as a junior and senior high school EFL (English as a foreign language) instructor. While looking into this, it has been particularly interesting to find that many teachers in Japan are using extensive reading to address their students' need for input, and to reflect on how such a program might be implemented at Shirayuri.

In this article, I would like to present several reasons to consider establishing an extensive reading program, along with options for going about this and recommendations for implementing a workable, effective program. I hope these ideas will be helpful to the staff of Sendai Shirayuri Gakuen and to others as they consider programs of this type.

The need for comprehensible input

Research indicates that second language (L2) acquisition can be aided by a combination of explicit language study (e.g., rule giving, consciousness raising, vocabulary work) (Ellis, 1990; Richard-Amato, 1988; Schmitt, 1995) and meaningful language use (Oller, 1979) in interactive contexts (Pica, Young, & Doughty, 1987; Swain, 1985). However, there is strong evidence that the primary requisite for significant acquisition is massive comprehensible input (Krashen, 1988; Richard-Amato, 1988).

Comprehensible input is language that learners read or hear that they can understand. No one learns a dissimilar second language merely by listening to talk radio in the L2 (Krashen, 1988; Long, 1985). The learner must be able to draw meaning from the input. This does not mean that *everything* should be understood; on the contrary, I+1 input, in which the learner occasionally has to infer meaning or wait for more data is seen as necessary to acquisition (Krashen, 1988). With more and more input, the learner is exposed over and over again to words, expressions, structures, and discourse-level conventions of language. With each exposure, the learner adds to his or her mental mapping of these features and how they are used in the target language (TL) (Ellis, 1995). In other words, learners begin to form ideas of the meaning and usage of new features, while extending and deepening their understanding of more familiar ones—just as learners acquire their first language (L1) (Krashen, 1988).

So where does this leave our students? Krashen (1988) and Richard-Amato (1988) note that getting comprehensible input can be difficult for low level learners, even in ESL (English as a second language) contexts, like the U.S. or Australia. How much more bleak for a student in an EFL setting like Japan, where one is rarely if ever called on to understand English in daily life? One could argue that there are plenty of opportunities for English exposure through television, video, radio, and newspapers; but how much of this is actually comprehensible to our students? Even if available, how often do these sources of input fit our students' schedules or seem relevant to their interests? It seems likely that the main

sources of English input for many students are the materials we as teachers direct them to.

Input through instruction and study

We may say that our students get a lot of input through our classes and it is obvious that many can and do make progress through our program. But how much input do they really get? In a given week, a typical first year high school student has six 45 minute periods of English and may do around three hours of homework. Assuming no further contact with English, that comes close to nine hours a week of total exposure—a fairly impressive number. However, not all of this constitutes comprehensible input. Much of language instruction in schools involves intensive study and manipulation of relatively limited amounts of language, e.g., translation of short reading texts, practicing dialogs, doing grammar exercises. These activities do involve some comprehensible input (e.g., the first time they are read or heard with understanding), but how much? As a first step, subtract the time students spend listening to and thinking or talking in Japanese. Next, subtract much of the time spent puzzling over grammar or usage problems, doing translations, and trying to *produce* language in written or spoken form. Also subtract any time consumed by bi-lingual dictionary searches or multiple re-reading of difficult texts. Finally, downgrade by some percent the time students spend reading unconnected sentences in various grammar and vocabulary exercises, which frequently offer no integrated meaning structure and no help in acquiring discourse-level features of language (Oller, 1979). Leave only the time spent listening to or reading fresh comprehensible input—input students can draw meaning from without reference to dictionaries or other helps. I can offer no statistics, but I am afraid that for many students, this would amount to surprisingly little.

This is not meant to imply that the bulk of what we do in English classes has no value. Our classes can play a key role in helping students become aware of language features, build useful strategies, and gain confidence and mechanical facility in the skill areas. We can help give students a leg up in making the input they receive comprehensible. Some educators (Richard-Amato, 1988) would particularly stress the last point, urging us not to think of our classes as the source of our students' learning, but rather to see them mainly as helping equip our students to learn on their own. This implies that students will access large volumes of input outside of class. But where is this critical input to come from?

Reading and input

In his address at TESOL 94, Krashen (1994) made a strong case for reading as possibly *the* most effective and efficient path to language acquisition. Through reading, L2 learners can obtain the massive amounts of input necessary for relatively rapid progress (Dawson, 1992; Krashen, 1994). Plentiful aural input is needed as well, but reading offers several advantages. It is an extremely portable activity, possible almost anywhere, anytime. It also offers advantages for vocabulary acquisition. Moderate to low frequency words occur much more frequently in written texts than in common speech, thus offering greater exposure for acquisition. The reader also has time, when needed, to form and confirm hypotheses. Speech, on the other hand, may pass by too quickly for this to be done (Ellis, 1995). Indeed, it is well established that people who read more have larger vocabularies

(Ellis, 1995; Krashen, 1994).

Happily, the effects of extensive reading are not limited to vocabulary and reading skills. Reading at appropriate levels contributes to *all* language skills (Dawson, 1992; Lightbown & Spada, 1993). In fact, numerous studies reveal the amount of reading students do as the single best predictor of writing skills and scores on standardized tests such as the TOEFL (Krashen, 1994).

Extensive vs. intensive reading

In the preceding discussion I made several references to *extensive reading*. What is it? First, let's look at what it is *not*.

Intensive reading

Extensive reading is not the *intensive* reading work done in many reading classes. This usually involves fairly short, sometimes quite difficult readings with associated exercises focusing on specific language points & reading skills, comprehension, and/or translation. Developing effective reading skills and strategies can be a tremendous aid in becoming strong, independent readers (Bamford, 1993). But if intensive work comprises the bulk of our students' exposure to reading, they will rarely be receiving optimal quantities of input and it is little wonder that reading in English can be seen as a slow, tiresome, even defeating process with little potential for pleasure (Dawson, 1992).

This may be particularly true of translation exercises. Word-for-word translation is an effective way of extracting meaning from a text in an unfamiliar language (Bamford, 1993), and it would seem well to equip students to handle this kind of situation. However, one of our main goals is to help our students along the way to fluency. Fluent readers do little or no translation as they read. They comprehend the text in the language in which it is written (Bamford, 1993). Students whose main exposure to English reading involves translation may see little potential for ever reading easily and fluently in English.

Decoding and interpreting

To better understand the preceding point and the kinds of texts that *can* give our students greater input and more hope as L2 readers, we need to look at the two main processes involved in reading—decoding and interpreting:

1. Fluent decoding involves "rapid, effortless, unconscious identification of written symbols" (Bamford, 1993, p. 64). Readers chunk words together into sense/meaning units and move on to the next unit, without individually analyzing each word. On the other hand, learners struggling with a difficult text or who are in the habit of translating, tend to decode the text in word-by-word fashion. This not only slows down the reading process; it results in lower comprehension, as well. It seems that we are able to store around seven meaning units in short term memory at one time. If a reader holds one word per meaning unit, s/he may lose track of the train of meaning before even reaching the end of a sentence. Multiple re-readings are then required. Fluent readers, however—chunking whole phrases or even sentences into each meaning unit—have a much easier time following the train of thought (Helgesen, 1995). The effects of this are

seen in studies relating reading speed and comprehension. Japanese college students, for example, tend to read in the range of 50–100 words per minute (wpm) (Katao, 1983), but comprehension is observed to suffer when reading speed drops below around 200 wpm (Eskey & Grabe, 1988). Many Japanese students may thus be discouraged not only by the time reading takes, but by their associated difficulties with comprehension. The main requirements for efficient decoding are familiarity with grammar and vocabulary. For our students to practice automatic processing, they need texts easy enough to encourage reading in sense units (Bamford, 1993).

2. The second process—interpretation—involves giving meaning to what we have decoded. Although each of us interprets what we read somewhat differently (bringing our own meaning to the text), we hope the understanding we derive is reasonably true to the author's intent. Efficient and effective interpretation of this type requires familiarity with the concepts in the text (Bamford, 1993). To experience and appreciate the potential for fluent reading, students must come to a text familiar enough with the content to interpret it or they must be supplied with the needed background—either by us or through the reading material itself (e.g., background notes, pictures).

Comprehensible input vs. comprehended input

Another factor influencing selection of reading material is the distinction made by Gass and Selinker (1993) between comprehensible and comprehended input. A text may be at an appropriate level for effective decoding and interpretation; it may be comprehensible. But if the reader does not actually comprehend the text, no input can be said to have occurred. All of us have probably had the experience of coming to the end of a reading passage only to find that we had been visually following the text, but had been thinking about something completely different. A text may be eminently comprehensible, but this does little good if it is never read or simply glazed over. This implies a need for input that holds the learner's interest. If engrossing and enjoyable for the reader, comprehensible input will be comprehended. Thus, we need to provide not only level-appropriate material, but material that stimulates the interest of our students.

Extensive reading

From the preceding discussion, we see that the major road blocks to our students gaining practice in needed decoding skills, feeling successful as readers, and gaining maximum comprehensible input are:

1. unfamiliar language
2. unfamiliar content
3. uninteresting/inappropriate content
4. insufficient availability of material
5. an *over* emphasis on intensive reading

Extensive reading programs can be specifically designed to overcome these pitfalls. As defined by (Dawson, 1992) "extensive reading" denotes a situation in which learners are reading a wide range of materials "just as they would in their own language—to learn more about something they are interested in, to enjoy a good story, to think about the ideas and

issues the material raises, to increase their general knowledge and awareness" (p. 5). Little if any translation should be required for enjoyment-level comprehension and readers "should be as unaware as possible that they are reading in a foreign language" (p. 5).

Graded readers

All of these conditions point directly to the use of graded readers and other graded reading material, selected to suit our students' interests and varying levels of proficiency. Major international publishers (e.g., Longman, Heinemann, Oxford, Macmillan) and numerous Japanese publishers produce a tremendous array of original and adapted novels, biographies, short stories, newspapers and magazines graded for vocabulary, structure, and content to provide comprehensible, L+1 input for learners at all levels.

Some educators discourage the use of such non-authentic texts, claiming they are inferior as models of language and lack important cues and clues for interpretation present in most authentic text (Haverson, 1991). I don't refute these objections, but feel they are outweighed by our students' need for interesting, comprehensible texts. Authentic texts can be used, even at lower levels, when text and task type allow readers to be successful (e.g., scanning a TV guide for show times, reading a newspaper article for gist), but this would normally be in the context of intensive, task based reading—not extensive reading for enjoyment. Some instructors address this difficulty by using authentic children's literature, even with high school and adult learners. While there's no doubt that older learners can appreciate children's literature, an exclusive diet of it would seem to deny them access to the wide range of content and theme that they have the capacity and desire to consider. Another difficulty with children's literature, as well as literature designed for native speaker literacy development, is that they are not necessarily controlled for vocabulary, grammar, and background knowledge. The assumption is that since readers are fluent speakers of the language, they will be able to interpret any text they can decode (Helgesen, 1995). This is not the case with L2 learners. I should qualify this by affirming that our long-term goal is that students will be able to read anything that interest or need suggests, but in the meantime, we hope that graded reading materials can serve as a bridge—providing comprehensible input, skills practice and increased confidence leading toward fluent handling of authentic texts and general growth in all language areas.

Which of the graded materials available would be most useful in an extensive reading program at Shirayuri? Short novels, biographies, and story collections are durable and easy to store. Their story lines motivate readers—encouraging extensive reading—but they are short enough that readers can frequently experience the sense of success and accomplishment that comes with understanding and finishing a real, foreign language book. Helgesen (1995) recommends readers published by Longman and Heinemann and the L.A. Hill material by Oxford as being consistently popular with his students at Miyagi Gakuin Junior College. Mysteries, detective stories, and tales of adventure head the list of popular genres, with humor and love stories also attracting readers. Although these types of books might make up the bulk of an extensive reading library, a wide range of content and format would accommodate differences in student interest and provide necessary variety for individual readers.

An added feature of many graded readers is the availability of matching audio tapes. These provide another channel for input (particularly helpful for more aural learners), help establish the connection between spoken and written forms, and provide potential for improving listening skills. DeCatur (1995) also reports that books with accompanying tapes are by far the most popular materials in her self-access English lab.

Table 1 shows a number of the major graded reader series, arranged by level from one to six. A number of new series (e.g., *Longman Easy Starts)* have been introduced since this table was published, but it remains a good framework for comparison. Helgesen (1995) reports that most of his first year college students are reading at levels two and three, with some at level four. We could expect the majority of our third year junior high through high school students to be reading at levels 1–3, although a number of higher level selections should be available for exceptional readers. Fortunately, the guidelines for determining level appropriacy are fairly clear. A student should be able to generally follow and enjoy a story without the aid of a dictionary. If she can't, she should begin reading at a lower level. Note again that this does not mean understanding every word. Some students report being comfortable reading texts with as low as an 80% vocabulary recognition rate. Supporting materials such as illustrations and tapes can also be a tremendous help in making borderline texts comprehensible. Investigation will be needed to determine the types of materials and program format best suited to our first and second year junior high school students. Since many first year students start at Shirayuri at absolute beginner level, even the easiest texts will be inaccessible to them at first. Possibly these students could start by listening to taped versions of the simplest readers with multiple illustrations and just make what they can of them. As their English skills progress, the input will become increasingly comprehensible.

Basic program format

Extensive reading programs tend to follow one of three basic formats.

1. *Class readers:* In this scenario, class members all read the same book at the same time. Each book read during the term becomes, in effect, one of the class texts. This has the advantage of allowing members of the class to discuss readings they are all familiar with, but allows little flexibility for individual student level, interest and enthusiasm for reading. It may be well to choose one or two books for whole class use to alert the class to the potential for enjoyment reading in English and to provide stimulus for group discussion. Beyond this, however, why not let the girls go where their interests and enthusiasm take them?
2. *Classroom libraries:* Here, a large number of books are made available to each class or to the English department as a whole—usually from a cart or shelving unit set up in one of the classrooms or an English resource room. Students pick books of interest to them and read as much as they like as long as they meet the minimum requirements set for the term. This allows for lots of interesting exchange as students tell each other about the books they are reading and point each other to interesting selections. The major disadvantage of the system is the amount of effort required on the part of English staff and students. The success or failure of this kind of program often largely depends on how easy it is to participate in and administer. A class library would have to involve

Table 1. Graded reader series arranged by level (after Bamford, 1993)

Series	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6
Collins English Library		**Level 1** **Level 2**		**Level 3**	**Level 4** **Level 5** **Level 6**	
Heinemann Guided Readers	Beginner Level		Elementary Level	Intermediate Level	Upper Level	
Heinemann New Wave Readers	Beginner Level	Elementary Level				
Longman Classics		Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	
Longman Structural Readers	Stage 1 Stage 2 (Horizontal format)	Stage 2 (Regular format)	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5	Stage 6
Oxford Bookworms		Stage 1 Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5 Stage 6	
Streamline Graded Readers (Oxford)	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3 Level 4	Level 5		
Other Series		Oxford English Picture Readers Grade 1	American Background Readers (Longman)		Alpha Books (Oxford) 1000 and 1500 headword Levels	The Bridge Series (Longman)
			Galaxies (Longman) Levels 1 and 2		Longman Simplified English Series	(Plus all ungraded books)
			Longman Famous Lives Elementary Level			
			Longman Movieworld Levels 1 and 2			

some kind of check out/record keeping system, penalties for tardiness and loss of materials, and monitoring during breaks and after school to allow access to the materials—all of which can become quite complicated. This leads to the last, and I believe best system.

3. *Readers available through the school library:* This option provides all the advantages of the class library with only a few of the headaches. There is no new system to set up. Students are already familiar with checkout and return procedures of the school library. There's no need for a special room or student monitors and students have space to read along with access to helpful materials (e.g., maps, encyclopedias, and (hopefully) tape players and headphones). At many schools, library staff are pleased to participate in this kind of program. They are happy for the students to read as much as possible, in any language, and cooperation in funding book purchases may even be possible if the books are housed in the library and made available to all students.

Estimates of the minimum book to student ratio for a library like this range between two and four to one (Bamford, 1993; Helgesen, 1995). Obviously, a full-blown program would require a large investment in books and space to house them.

What do we ask of the students?

The first question most students have is "How much do we have to read?" The minimum requirement may be a given number of books or pages. Helgesen (1995), assigns 500 pages (or points) a term to his first year college reading students.The high number of pages forces students to look for materials at a level they can read easily. If they try to do the word-by-word dictionary searches, they will never finish. At the same time, he wants them to push themselves and getting maximal I+1 input, so he uses a point system that gives credit for each page read based on its difficulty:

Level 1 = .5 points per page (ppp)
Level 2 = .75 ppp
Level 3 = 1 ppp
Level 4 and above = 1.25 ppp
(Levels from Table 1 (Bamford, 1993).)

Although I doubt if we could assign 500 pages per term, we should be thinking of a number that would discourage dictionary use and provide a significant amount of input. Whatever point system is used will need to be set differently for each grade level. One way to encourage students to read as much as possible would be to implement a reading contest, with recognition and prizes for the top readers in each grade level and class.

Unfortunately, we can't just ask our students to turn in a list of the books they've read at the end of the term. We need some way to check that they have actually done the reading and to elicit their ideas on the material, but this must not become a burden to students or instructors. Our purpose is to have students spending hours discovering the joys of reading, not producing book reports. A good compromise seems to be the instant book report form (Helgesen, 1995) (Figure 1). Students fill out a form for each book they read and hand it in or file it in their reading notebook. Each report should take no more than ten or fifteen minutes. Reports focus on affective response to the book as a whole.

again emphasizing that students are not doing intensive reading, but reading for main ideas, to follow and enjoy the flow of the story. Reports are only checked for completion, not for grammar and vocabulary, and can be used both by instructors to evaluate books and by students to help support occasional oral book reports in class.

The form in Figure 1 would be appropriate for relatively advanced high school students. Lower level students (e.g., second year junior high) might fill out a much simpler form as in Figure 2. The "What/who did you like best?" question could be answered with one word or a whole sentence, depending on the student, e.g., "Alice", "I like Alice.", "The ending is exciting." Students could even fill out reports in Japanese if a Japanese teacher were checking them.

Finally, students would log their impressions of each book in an evaluation sheet taped inside the front cover (Figure 3). Rather than logging a "√" or a "O", they would write their year in school, e.g., 中 1 , 高 II, in the appropriate column. This would give prospective readers a more specific idea of how different grade groups responded to the reading.

Final thoughts on running the program

Two final questions to consider are, "Who would run the program?" and "How would we get started?" Since most students take several different English classes, one of these should probably be designated as "the class that includes extensive reading." Choosing a reading class, would make sense, but since extensive reading should help to promote all language skills, convenience and a sense of which class would be the "best fit," might be the best determiners (e.g., class discussion and occasional oral book reports would fit easily into a conversation class). All instructors, however, could take a role in encouraging the students and would be free to make use of the extensive reading materials in their own classes.

On the issue of how to get started, it might be best to start with a test group, for example a specific class (English Oral B), a specific grade (高 I), or one grade in both the junior high and high school (中1 and 高 I). The program could then be gradually phased in for all appropriate groups. This would allow kinks in the program to be gradually worked out and would allow the considerable investment in books to be made over a period of years instead of all at once. This would also allow easier fine-tuning of the library to fit the abilities and interests of our students.

Conclusion

Extensive reading programs, if well-implemented, have proved to be very popular among teachers and students alike, at both college and high school levels. They don't require a great amount of extra effort to run, but have tremendous potential benefits for the students in terms of language development, knowledge about the world, and appreciation of literature. I hope the ideas presented here will prove useful to the staff at Shirayuri as they consider developing such a program and I look forward to seeing the benefits that may result.

Book Report Date: _____

Name: _____ 学年____ 組____ 番号____

•What's the title? _____

•What kind of writing is it? (circle one)

mystery, detective story, adventure story, science fiction story, love story, humorous story
biography, true story, magazine article, newspaper article, *other:* _____

•Briefly tell us about it (2 or 3 sentences). What's it about? What happened?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

•Did you like it? _____ Why or why not?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

•Level? 1 2 3 4 5 •How many pages did you read? _____

•How long did it take to read? _____ hours. _____ minutes

•This book/article was: a)too easy for me b) just right c) too difficult

•Any other comments? _____

_____

_____

Figure 1. Intermediate-Level Instant Book Report Form

Book Report Date: _____

Name: _____ 学年____ 組____ 番号____

•What's the title? _____

•Did you like it? (circle one) Yes, I did.
It was ok.
No, I didn't.

•What did you like best about it? *or* Who was your favorite character?

_____

_____

_____

•Level? 1 2 3 4 5 •How many pages did you read? _____

•How long did it take to read? _____ hours, _____ minutes

•This book/article was: a)too easy for me b) just right c) too difficult

Figure 2. Elementary-Level Instant Book Report Form

How did you like this book? Write your year-level in the appropriate column.

I liked it.	It was ok	I didn't like it.
6年 II		中3

Figure 3. Front cover evaluation sheet

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